

Belize continued to struggle with the negative effects of organized crime, gang violence, drug trafficking, and corruption in 2014. Several corruption cases were ongoing in 2014, including one involving the illegal sale and distribution of Belizean passports to foreign nationals. U.S. and Belizean authorities cooperated in the arrests of several Belize-based businesses involved in fraud and money laundering, leading to the indictment of six businesses and six individuals in September.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 36 / 40 [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 12 / 12

The head of state is the British monarch, who is represented by a governor general. Members of the 31-seat House of Representatives, the lower house of the bicameral National Assembly, are directly elected for five-year terms. The 12 appointed members of the Senate serve for five-year terms; the Senate president may be chosen from outside the legislative body, bringing the total number of senators to 13 in some cases.

In elections held in 2012, the center-right United Democratic Party (UDP) and incumbent prime minister Dean Barrow held on to power, capturing 50.4 percent of the national vote and 17 seats in the House of Representatives. The center-left People's United Party (PUP) won 47.5 percent and 14 seats; turnout was 73.2 percent. The PUP alleged that the elections were not entirely free and fair. The Organization of American States' first ever Electoral Observation Mission (EOM) to Belize noted a number of problems, including complaints of voter-list irregularities and concerns that party activists were electioneering outside of polling centers. Although the EOM still characterized the elections as free and fair, it did call on the government to pass campaign finance legislation, noting that political financing is unregulated in Belize. The Supreme Court upheld elections results in three constituencies contested by the PUP, as well as in one constituency contested by the UDP.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 14 / 16

There are no restrictions on the right to organize or join political parties. The UDP and PUP dominate a competitive two-party system, though a number of smaller parties are also active. The interests of the Mestizo, Creole, Mayan, and Garifuna ethnic groups are generally represented and discussed in the National Assembly.

C. Functioning of Government: 10 / 12

Belize is the only country in Central America that is not a party to the UN Convention against Corruption. Since 2009, Transparency International has not had enough access to data to include Belize in its annual Corruption Perceptions Index.

The case of Elvin Penner, a member of the House of Representatives and a former minister of state in the immigration ministry, continued in 2014. Penner was dismissed from his post in 2013 after he was found to have been involved in the illegal issuance of a Belizean passport to a South Korean national who was incarcerated in Taiwan at the time of the passport's issuance. Three immigration officers and the deputy mayor of Belize City also faced disciplinary action in relation to the case, though all of them were reinstated later. The Citizens Organized for Liberty through Action (COLA), a local nongovernmental organization (NGO), filed criminal complaints against Penner in February 2014. Although Penner was arraigned on two criminal charges in March, the case was dismissed for lack of evidence in July. COLA appealed the ruling in August, and the case was ongoing at year's end.

A number of other officials were involved in corruption scandals in 2014. Minister of State Edmund Castro faced scrutiny in 2014 amid revelations about irregularities in financial transactions made by the Belize Airport Authority. In September, the PUP dismissed Arthur Saldivar, one of the party's executive members and an attorney, following an internal investigation into his alleged theft of \$900,000 from former clients.

Also in September, U.S. authorities unsealed an indictment against six Belize-based firms and six individuals—including both U.S. and Belizean nationals—based on charges of money laundering, tax evasion, and securities fraud. Belizean authorities had cooperated in the investigation of the case.

A number of corruption cases have also involved infrastructure projects in recent years. Allegations of misallocated funds in the repair of San Estevan Road in the Orange Walk District continued in 2014.

Civil Liberties: 51 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 15 / 16

Belize has a generally open media environment. The constitution guarantees freedom of the press, but authorities can restrict this freedom in the interest of national security, public order, or morality. The Belize Broadcasting Authority has the right to prior restraint of all broadcasts for national security or emergency reasons, though this is rarely enforced in practice. In 2013, a whistleblower accused Minister of State Castro of involvement in violations of immigration law. In February 2014, Castro filed a defamation suit against the whistleblower and Great Belize Television, which had aired the allegations. A trial date has been set for 2015.

Despite the availability of diverse sources of media, including privately-owned weekly newspapers and radio and television stations, concerns over government control of the broadcast industry continue in the wake of the nationalization of Belize Telemedia Limited, the country's largest telecommunications company. While the government does not restrict internet access or use, penetration is low due to lack of infrastructure and high costs.

Residents of Belize enjoy full freedom of religion, and academic freedom is respected.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 11 / 12

Freedoms of assembly and association are generally upheld, and peaceful demonstrations usually proceed without interference from the government. A large number of NGOs are active, and labor unions remain politically influential despite their shrinking ranks. Official boards of inquiry adjudicate labor disputes, and

businesses are penalized for labor-code violations. However, the government has done little to combat antiunion discrimination, and workers who are fired for organizing rarely receive compensation.

F. Rule of Law: 12 / 16

The judiciary is independent, and the rule of law is generally respected. However, concerns remain that the judicial system is vulnerable to political interference. A backlog of cases has led to substantial delays in the judiciary process; about one-fifth of the country's detainees were awaiting trial in 2014.

Violent crime, gang violence, and drug trafficking remain serious concerns. There have been reports of the use of excessive force by police, including against detainees. A senior police superintendent negotiated a truce with gangs in Belize City in April 2014, but a series of shootings nevertheless occurred in June and September, leading police to increase patrols and checkpoints. Arrests are made in approximately 30 percent of all major crimes and in 61 percent of minor crimes; however, only an estimated 10 percent of homicides result in a conviction. Belize is both a source and transit country for drug trafficking.

According to the International Center for Prison Studies, Belize has the world's 11th-highest prisoner-to-public ratio, with about 449 inmates per 100,000 inhabitants. The country's prisons do not meet minimum international standards, although prison conditions have improved in recent years.

LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people face legal and societal discrimination, and same-sex sexual activity is illegal. A transgender woman was stoned and beaten by a mob before being rescued by police in June 2014. Gay and lesbian foreigners are legally prohibited from entering Belize, although immigration officials do not enforce the relevant law.

There have been reports of discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS, despite the government's efforts to educate the public about the medical conditions.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 13 / 16

The Belizean Court of Appeals ruled in 2013 that more than 30 Mayan communities in southern Belize have rights to their ancestral lands, but that the government is not responsible for providing documentation of ownership or for preventing third parties from using the land. Indigenous communities continue to criticize government concessions that permit foreign corporations to exploit their lands.

Violence against women and children remains a serious concern, as does the prevalence of child labor in agriculture. Gender disparities are profound; Belize ranks 100 out of 142 countries on the World Economic Forum's 2014 Global Gender Gap Report.

Belize is a source, transit, and destination country for women and children trafficked for sexual exploitation and forced labor, and there are concerns that Belize is increasingly becoming a destination for child sex tourism. The government passed a law to prevent the sexual exploitation of children in 2013. In August 2014, Belize and Taiwan signed an agreement to cooperate in combatting human trafficking.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

[Full Methodology](#)